

Well, I'll Be Dammed!
Hollywood and the Anthropocene in the American West

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*Every sick, fickle fucker
Childhood's what makes you
Until they treat you like tundra
Weigh those opinions
More like air than lead*

*Every planned occupation
Surefire disappointment up ahead
Until they treat you like desert
See mirages of friendship
Face turns red*

Aaaawwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww, shit!

*(I don't feel and it feels fine
Save twenty dollars and I'll give you my supplies
I don't mind)*

*Here's the soon to be anchor
Build bridges to nothing, you'll get nowhere
(I don't feel and that feels fine
I don't feel and that feels fine)*

*Every governor's mother
Knows that their bread is buttered by Sam
(Crook takes
Crook takes green out of wallet)*

*And what about science?
They find proof and let you make your own decisions
(There are answers to our reasons
Worthwhile to find)*

*Every child star wonders
If they have a future up ahead
(King takes queen, takes queen out clean
It's all right, it's all right)*

*Every kind-hearted banker
I don't think there is one
(I took you out)*

*Every winning opinion
I wish I had one
(I took you out for a night on the town)*

I took my wallet out)

*Every winning opinion
I, I wish I had one
(You don't mind?
Well now, that's just bullshit)*

*Stand on platforms in water
Filling jars full of silence, you'll get nowhere
(You're balancing balls on your nose, all right
I don't mind, I don't mind
So sometimes you want your own space
And that's all right, right?
Right)*

*(Get too creative ordering our drinks
And mine stinks, mine stinks
Get too creative ordering our drinks
And yours stinks, yours stinks, yours stinks
We get too creative
We get too creative)*

— Modest Mouse, “Tundra/Desert”

I. Introduction - Where Are We, How Did We Get Here, and What Do We Do?

The United States is in crisis. Despite the copious amounts of technologies available to us in the year 2016, we are utterly failing to address on the domestic level the impending catastrophes of climate change. While the American Society of Civil Engineers gave the overall infrastructure of the nation a D+ g.p.a.,¹ we face coming changes in weather and climate throughout the country, as well as a degradation of land and general depletion of resources (usable freshwater above and below ground, biodiversity, habitats thanks to the clear-cutting of forests and wildfires, and occasionally mountaintops). Interestingly enough, however, this problem does not come from a lack of solutions. People have developed many sustainable technologies and modes of living that could help with these issues. Scientist Julian Cribb, in his book *The Coming Famine*, outlines many solutions to coming crises related to food shortages and the exhaustion of land. There are many easy-to-implement tactics to address climate change-related issues; these include incorporating urban farming into the landscapes of cities, a healthier world diet, choosing green architectural designs such as curved highways to collect rainfall or building sidewalks with permeable materials in order to allow rainwater to return to the soil and replenish groundwater levels, and investing in renewable energy.² With the scientific community practically screaming at the top of their lungs to be heard by policymakers and politicians — as anti-climate change rhetoric is pretty ubiquitously employed by all Republicans while most Democrats remain relatively silent on the subject — we seem to have some problems with implementation and execution on the part of the U.S. government.

¹ "Infrastructure Grades for 2013." 2013 Report Card for America's Infrastructure. Accessed March 30, 2016. <http://www.infrastructurereportcard.org/>.

² Cribb, Julian. *The Coming Famine: The Global Food Crisis and What We Can Do to Avoid It*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010. 189-192.

Government, mind you, is but composed of individual people. And the United States is especially interesting, being created by people wholly unfamiliar with their landscape. Landing on a continent so abundant that it was described by settlers as dumbfounding³, colonists implemented a new human society on the land, pushing out and largely destroying its previous inhabitants. From the time of the first European settlers, American Indians' peoples, whose lifestyles can be largely credited to the abundance of the landscape, have been disrupted or destroyed, thus losing a great deal of knowledge of the natural landscape. The following society's structure had its consequences:

Settlers had first to survive and prosper before they could sell commodities across the sea, and that meant understanding the land they lived in. By the time they did this, however, the land was already changing in response to that new understanding, creating a landscape different from the one that had been there before.⁴

Human societies have always had an impact on the shape of their surrounding ecologies; however, with the onset of more and more industry with more and more waste, a growing treadmill reliance on chemicals in seemingly every facet of American life, the infrastructure of globalization, as well as and perhaps especially large developmental decisions made by the United States as it expanded West, the effect of human societies on the environment has been amplifying over time.

In fact, Duke Law professor and writer-on-America Jedediah Purdy declares in his latest book, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*, that we live now in an era in which humans are the primary catalysts of change to the Earth's climate, geology, ecology, and landscape. He advocates for a politics of nature, discrediting the idea that market-oriented environmental

³ Cronon, William. *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1983. 22.

⁴ Cronon. *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. 21-22.

reform is the solution to these growing problems: “Market reform is not a way around politics. Imagining that it could be dampens the very politics that might produce an adequate response. Widely held, strongly felt ways of valuing nature are sometimes necessary conditions of new laws that govern nature in new ways.”⁵ He continues, writing, “...the danger is in an approach to the Anthropocene that rhetorically embraces the need for humans to shape the world, but cuts off all avenues of radical and generative politics about how to do that, reducing our Anthropocene choices to a convenient minimum.”⁶ When looking at the history of the development of the United States, specifically the American West, we see that policymaking decisions, rooted in profit and the commodification of the natural world, caused profound effects on our planet. In addition, the U.S. approached the settling of the West from the federal level, which imposed an unfamiliar politics onto the landscape. Many resultant developmental decisions have had so many repercussions reverberating globally that the past 150 years of U.S. government could arguably be credited with causing climate change.

When examining the motivations for policymaking decisions that eventually went so wrong, we see a detachment from the continent’s respective ecosystems via total emphasis on the profitability of North America’s natural resources. In addition to the environmental havoc eventually wrecked by America’s designs, the implementation of these policies required a manipulation of law and the near extermination of American Indian peoples, and with them their knowledge of the landscape. With ideas from David Graeber’s book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* — governments design and shape markets — in mind, the development of the American West was largely based on the desire to create of the continent an Empire founded on masculine ideals,

⁵ Purdy, Jedediah. *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 2015. 45.

⁶ Purdy, Jedediah. *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*. 46.

dominate and conquer the forces of Nature, and improve the nation's national efficiency and economic prowess.⁷ Because of the landscape's barren nature, we see this manifesting itself mainly through water resource management, civilizations being impossible sans irrigation. The markets that subsequently developed were related to populating the arid desert. Railroads, real estate companies, engineers and developers, all had large land and water holdings, having collaborated and worked closely within earshot and in the ear of politicians and city planners, influencing the shape of the resultant, heavily-curated cities of the West, such as Los Angeles.

In order to entice people to leave their homes for the Wild West, profit- and fame-hungry politicians created and heavily advertised cities promoting superficial, materialist, get-rich-quick cultures with values in total disregard of the future. The casinos and spectacle of Las Vegas or the glamor of Hollywood culture, bursting with millionaire movie stars and product placement, that defines Los Angeles and Southern California as a whole require an immense amount of water to sustain, demanding the rerouting and damming of our great Western rivers. The environmental effects wrought by the creation of this society, which is based on competition and production rather than the fostering of meaningful relationships and steadfast communities living in accordance to the limitations of their respective geographies, are especially troubling in the face of nature and the Earth's growingly unpredictable and extreme climate. As our infrastructure falls apart, the general populace has no knowledge of their natural surroundings/ecosystems, their values curated and prescribed by industries and government desiring global fame and empire. Simultaneously, the nation is plagued by a general political apathy that is a product of this insincere, competitive culture. In his book *For Common Things*:

⁷ Purdy, Jedediah. *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*, 35

Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today, Purdy writes, “The problem with a world where everything is derivative is the suspicion that we are patched-together remnants of someone else’s imagination, unreal, not our own.”⁸ With the permanence of these developmental structures, like the Hoover and Grand Coulee Dams, we must ask ourselves a question or two — where are we, how did we get here, and what do we do?

The existence of Hollywood and the society that we are to a large degree stuck with cannot be used to effect positive change in this Anthropocene epoch. With the capabilities film as a media provides, the very culture created by these bad decisions can be used to inform, educate, and inspire others to understand the context of their very existence within the larger framework of the nation. Continuing with these Blakean ideas, art when carefully executed can convey important ideas and Truths to the audience, which can have the power to steer the course of individuals, inspire active participation in life, thus catalyzing systemic changes to the nation, inspiring people to get involved and shape the communities and world they envision for themselves, others, future generations, and the planet at-large.

By examining films, one of the most popular medium of art of our time, one that grew out of and alongside the development of the American West, we can examine the nation’s culture, politics, and history through the byproducts of those very things. Films from popular genres, including Westerns and neo-noir that in their own ways subvert their genres and the conventions of film itself through experimentation and innovation infiltrate popular media and help to redirect society by calling into question the audience’s culture and values. By closely examining the films *Little Big Man* (1970) and *Chinatown* (1974), alongside the history of

⁸ Purdy, Jedediah. *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1999. 28.

development in the American West, the markets and culture it created (as well as the how and why), the implications it has on us as distinct people and the Earth become clear; the cost of our society has been our environment, culture, and individuality. Most importantly, the films provide ideas about how each of us can move forward to pave a better tomorrow — and an arguably better today — through active engagement and involvement in our local communities and ourselves.

II. The Commandeering of the American West as Seen Through *Little Big Man*

When looking at the current state of the United States and the decisions that led to this very moment in time, we must recall that the nation, in addition to being a relatively young albeit the most powerful country on the planet, was once much smaller. While California and Oregon were incorporated into the Union by the time of the Civil War, much of the American Midwest and West was divided into different territories, designated between American Indians and Whites. The latter half of the 19th century saw rapid expansion Westward; despite treaties giving groups — Indians included — legal rights to certain lands, the entire century following the Civil War became characterized by a manipulation of these treaties and their affiliated laws on the part of the United States in order to acquire more and more property. Indeed, the U.S. had purchased its continental territories before the Civil War, and Alaska from Russia shortly after, and its main goals appearing to revolve around economic prosperity and military power on both the domestic and international levels — goals requiring resources.

According to environmental historian William Cronan, a mentality present in American culture since its apparently less-than-humble origins is one in which land and the natural world

at-large is viewed in terms of profitability. Cronan writes that land “became for the colonists a form of capital, a thing consumed for the express purpose of creating augmented wealth” (Cronan 169). Thus each component of a landscape is viewed individually, valued based on what can be produced of it. This directly contrasts the mindset of the many peoples living on the North American continent who had a complicated relationship and history with the land, basing their niche lifestyles on their surrounding geography. Though ways-of-life varied greatly between regions and tribes, American Indians were generally nomadic and had a concept of property where society operated as a nomadic unit with no real concept of land ownership. This contrast between the two societies is depicted 1970 Arthur Penn film *Little Big Man*, in which Dustin Hoffman’s character, known as both Jack Crabb and Little Big Man, jumps between the post-Civil War cultures of the Frontier and that of the Northern Cheyenne. The film not only juxtaposes these two lifestyles, but also shows the ways in which the United States manipulated treaties and law in order to take advantage of and slowly eradicate the American Indian peoples, used religion as a justification and means of doing so, the repercussions of doing so, and why it was done.

Employing a rather fantastical and historical frame narrative, *Little Big Man* is able to show the events leading up to the Battle of Little Bighorn. The film opens with an interview between an unbelievably old Jack Crabb and a young journalist, who is visiting Jack’s nursing home in order to learn about the “primitive” lifestyle of the Plains Indians. The man is condescending towards Jack, assuming he was but an Indian fighter for General Custer; angrily, Jack recounts a story where his family’s covered wagons headed West were ambushed by Indians, killing his whole family save himself and his sister Caroline. Shadow That Comes

Inside, a Cheyenne brave, rescues the two. While Caroline ultimately flees, Jack is adopted by the tribe, soon earning the name Little Big Man. As fighting between Whites and Indians increase over time, Jack finds himself jumping back and forth between the two worlds at a moment's notice. This allows the historical events leading up to the Battle of Little Bighorn to be viewed at the ground-level from an "eyewitness," showing exactly how these societies differ, and the implications of those differences, as well. Done, too, through humor, *Little Big Man* contrasts a comically bad society with a comically good one, adding an element of *American Indian Culture*

Jack spends his adolescence and teenage years amongst the Cheyenne, or as they call themselves, the human beings. Adopted by Indian Old Lodge Skins, an eccentric grandfatherly figure who is in fact played by Chief Dan George, a Canadian Indian and chief on the Burrard Indian Reserve No. 3 (IMDB), Jack learns the ways of the Cheyenne. Small and tight-knit, the community operates around its individual members and their strengths to form a cohesive unit. There is no predetermined or encouraged path for anyone except their own. For instance, unlike American society which historically had and still has registration for the draft, men did not have to become warriors if they "did not have the temperament" (*Little Big Man*). Little Horse, a friend of Jack's, is therefore allowed to stay with the women and eventually becomes a he'eman, a feminine male charged with leading certain ceremonies and other individuated tasks (Wishart). The Cheyenne appear to base its culture around its members thus utilizing their strengths, rather than forcing each member to conform to a proscribed role. Similarly, when Jack is being ridiculed by his peers, such as his longtime rival Younger Bear, for being in actuality white *and* very small in size, Old Lodge Skins tells him the story of Little Man, an Indian who though small

in size was as courageous and strong a fighter as any other. The tribe in the film demonstrates an inclusivity towards people for what they are, as well as a celebration of both individual differences and a commonality of being. As Jack Crabb giddy-ups on a horse in the sublime Montana scenery — “livin’ Injun,” as his 122-year-old self recalls — he and this way of life appear and feel quite free.

When looking at the Cheyenne’s view of the natural world, we see a philosophy based on the idea of life and the interconnectedness of all things. Everything thus demands great reverence. On these Cheyenne ideas, Old Lodge Skins tells Jack, “The Human Beings, they believe everything is alive, not only man and animals, but also water, Earth, stone, and also the things from them, like that hair. The man from whom this hair came is bald on the other side because I now own his scalp.” (*Little Big Man*) Life is so revered that their battle tactics are based more in humiliating than killing the enemy. Similarly, comments about the environment are made throughout the film—Jack, at one point remarks to Old Lodge Skins, “The river is part of the great circle of the waters of the Earth.” (*Little Big Man*) The real Northern Cheyenne culture, too, is described as extremely holistic:

...the elements of their economy, history, religion, language, sacred belongings, their health and medicine, education, livelihood, their allodial existence with its cultural imperatives in maintaining the environmental and cultural integrity of its land and water in particular, their customs and traditions, their music and arts cannot be separated from the rest of the elements that make up the culture. (The Northern Cheyenne World View 2-2)

Customs and lifestyles, for the Cheyenne and most American Indians on either coast, were structured in a way (1) individuated to the landscape and (2) that helped increase the Earth's natural abundance when possible. As an example of how Indians would live "according to" their geography, the wild Digger Indians lived "numbingly primitive" lives in the Great Basin, where rattlesnakes and jackrabbits were the most substantial species. Called "the wretchedest type of mankind I have ever seen" by author Mark Twain, "They built no lodges, used the crudest tools, made no art. They subsisted, from all appearances, on roots and insects; a live gecko made a fine repast" (Reisner 21). Other American Indians, in addition to being what Twain referred to as reflections of their landscapes, took their lifestyles further by incorporating cosmic ideas and philosophies about the role of humankind.

Like the Cheyenne, the Zuni Pueblo Indians of the American Southwest believed they had a duty to complete their traditions, which were often associated with the seasons, weather, fertility, etc. At their Shalako festival, for instance, the Zunies prayed to the Messengers of the Gods, appearing as giant birds, to carry rain to every corner of the Earth (Wenger 17). In fact, the Zuni Pueblo went as far as to say that failure to properly conduct this series of ceremonies would cause disasters around the world. Tribal council member Virgil Wyaco said, "The dances must be done every year if the Zuni would is to survive. We Zuni believe the outside world, too, would cease to exist" (Wenger 19). Located in the arid desert, water—some may say obviously—is a primary concern being scale yet the basis of all life. To return to the Northern Cheyenne and with them *Little Big Man*, the peoples believed that maintenance of the Earth's natural cleansing systems required precision and balance. If they failed to be diligent, the Cheyenne believed in

a real potential for upsetting the elemental balances within the environmental systems in which these life elements are sustained. In these regards, the cultural practices of the Cheyenne are geared to use only that which is needed to provide basic sustenance for their health and general well-being, leaving the rest to replenish Grandmother Earth in providing sustenance to all other life beings in a manner that does not upset the environmental balances which sustain all life. (The Northern Cheyenne World View 2-3 - 2-4).

The Cheyenne and other American Indian societies were structured around humankind's relationship with nature and how, through an ongoing history with said environment, to best promote its fullness of life. Just the way of living, with joys based on relationships, spiritual contemplation, and the natural world thus requiring few material possessions, depicted in *Little Big Man* clearly leaves little trace because they are a part of the landscape. White American society, on the other hand, lived a much more obtrusive lifestyle.

U.S. Expansion Westward

Of White society Old Lodge Skins says, "White Man, they believe everything is dead — stone, earth, animals — and people! Even their own people! If things keep trying to live, White Man will rub them out!" (*Little Big Man*). The real Cheyenne, too, believed that the White Man lived an evil lifestyle, "disassociated from the essences of humankind":

Nothing seems to be sacred to the white man anymore in that his spiritual/metaphysical understanding is now grounded in temporal considerations of his physical environment with no real sense of care to maintain its life essences to maintain his own existence, and that this comes at a time when the pollution caused by the unwise use of industrial technology is beginning to have a noticeable destructive effect on the natural essences which sustain all life. (The Northern Cheyenne World View 2-3)

Indeed, Jack Crabb's experiences first-hand as a citizen of the United States of America just how little the nation values life. Though he is immediately sent to live with a Reverend, the culture he

witnesses is anything but pure. Jack soon meets a swindler named Merriweather selling a fake miracle medicine that causes many people in town to die. Through his various schemes to make money, Merriweather slowly lost and continued to lose parts of his body, from a hand to an eye to a leg, until he resembles a pirate at the end of the film. The man lacks any vision of moral order, his only ideology being that “business involves an particle of risk.” Merriweather is eventually apprehended thus reuniting Jack with his sister Caroline and moving him into his “gun-fighting period.” As Carolina remarks, “Why a man ain’t complete without his gun!” (*Little Big Man*) The image of a tough, gun-slinging cowboy, killing others in cold-blooded and seemingly random duels, is equated with masculinity. Despite this, Jack and other gun-fighters live in a constant state of paranoia and anxiety about potentially being shot, causing them to be ready at-all-times to shoot somebody. While Jack is still only the Soda Pop Kid, the more experienced gun-fighters have since moved onto drinking hard liquor, in some cases by the bottle.

When considering Jack’s intertwined experiences as both a peddler and a gun-fighter, it is difficult *not* to then compare the two lifestyles, and, upon further examination, they are rather similar in theme. The gunslingers are out to get people and suspicious of others trying to do the same, and Merriweather really is out to get people (even if in a fiscal sense, he still causes innocent people to die, and cause himself serious harm, in pursuit of material gain). These less-common lifestyles serve as an apt metaphor for what many people likely attempted, entrepreneurial business, which Jack tries for himself after marrying a foreign bride, Olga. Unfortunately for the newlyweds, Jack’s partner was a thief and stole all his money. The society of the White Man is depicted as a violent, competitive place governed by a survival of the fittest

mentality. This materialistic greed ran so deep that in a comical carriage chase scene, the driver refuses to hand over his gun to the former gunfighter because, as he screams, “It’s mine!” A man, as Caroline said, is incomplete without his gun. When considering Theodore Roosevelt’s Boone and Crockett Club juxtaposed beside his desire to create an empire based on managerialist national efficiency, one can view this gun imagery as the industrial power to conquer the land and turn its components into mere resources to be processed and sold. So, in the face of economic downturn, Jack meets a fictionalized General George Armstrong Custer, who recommends that he pack up and move out West to try again, him lacking all social standing and worth without wealth. In the film, Custer represents a sort of U.S. military imperialism, search for empire and power, hasty or compromised decisions, and a push towards maximized production, making his advice here is telling of American policymaking mindset and reasons for moving Westward.

Upon returning once again to the Cheyenne, Old Lodge Skins tells Jack that he had a dream, which had come true, about him and an elephant spigot at a soda fountain, with an emphasis placed on its tusks. Out of place on the North American continent but an animal famously a target of poaching, this imperialistic imagery alludes to the real reason for expansion: natural resources. When Jack later runs into Merriweather, albeit a few limbs fewer, he comments on the profitability of buffalo out West, saying of their hides, “world of money chewin’ grass on those plains” (*Little Big Man*). In this way the film stays true to history, as natural resources and the desire to commodify them really did cause Americans to head towards the Frontier. Here, as Cronan described, we see a manifestation of this materialist mentality centered around putting resources to use for profit. Beaver pelts, for instance, caused people to

move out West because they were so wildly fashionable on hats in the 1820s (Reisner 20). Other heavily sought-out resources included timber, gold, and buffalo.

In California in 1855, competition over resources flared to such a point that water itself became a commodifiable resource claimable by prior-appropriation.⁹ So much was the total disregard for the natural world and the systems of which the Cheyenne spoke that the Supreme Court of California demanded that protected be the rights of “those who, by prior appropriation, have taken the waters of from their natural beds, and by costly artificial works have conducted them for miles over mountains and ravines, to supply the necessities of gold diggers, and without which the most important interests of the mineral region would remain without development” (Irwin vs. Philips). Citing the fact that land in the American West is technically owned by the government, riparian law is void seeing as waterfront landowners do not *actually* own the land (Irwin vs. Philips). The only way to own the land, then, is to develop it into something one can own. A more concrete example of this comes from the General Mining Law of 1872 that “gives any person title to valuable minerals that he or she finds on much public land. In theory, an individual can come to own the land itself by developing a mine” (Purdy 74). In a society in which wealth and money are the be-all-end-alls, the U.S. government makes certain exceptions in the name of economic development. As David Graeber points out in *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, governments create markets. When stepping away from the production, commodity, and profit-based culture, we can see that a desire for an empire as great as Rome’s fueled many of the federal government’s decisions in regards to Westward expansion and development. Through

⁹ First-come, first-serve

religion, law, and religion *in* American law, the U.S. government was able to usurp and develop the North American continent as they saw fit — or, as it often happened, as businessmen saw fit.

Religion, Law, and Religion in American Law on the Frontier

After the Civil War, the United States was a largely broken and fragmented place, finally forced to confront many of the inequalities and problems within its political system. As Jedediah Purdy writes in *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* on the work of Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis,"

American democracy had taken shape in historically unique exemption from the basic problem of managing conflicting interests and values in a world of relative scarcity....When (white) Americans felt trapped in poverty or exploitation, they could (in principle) leave for open land, reverting to what Turner imagined as an earlier stage of social development and giving themselves a second chance at history's casino (Purdy 34).

Perhaps that explains why General Custer told Jack to head West in *Little Big Man*. Let us not forget, however, that while some of the land in the American West is indeed nearly uninhabitable, the land was in fact inhabited by peoples like the Northern Cheyenne.

Unfortunately for these non-industrial peoples, the overpowering technology gave the U.S., as Jack Crabb said, odds of which one should not (or perhaps could not) be proud. Despite a clear upper-hand, the U.S. still needed to justify its actions culturally and legally to its domestic and international audiences — after all, as the journalist at the very beginning of *Little Big Man* points out, what was to occur to the American Indian populations after the Civil War and throughout the 20th Century was genocide, near-total extermination, by all definitions of the

word. The legitimacy the government needed came through religion in both culture and law dehumanizing and de-legitimizing American Indians and their claims to land.

Before getting to religion, though important, a word on water law. Through the aforementioned prior appropriation law, American Indians obviously had no claim to land rights, lacking any and all permanent developments through which to obtain it, as the doctrine required that water (more valuable than land, as many of the first settlers discovered) be put to some sort of beneficial use. Prior-appropriation allowed for the government to justify its breaching treaties with tribes and its subsequent hostile attacks. More often than not, what actually ended up happening was that Americans prior-appropriating and thus rerouting and damming waterways was that many American Indian tribes' lands historically are flooded by reservoirs or deprived of water sources. Not only were these projects far less than cost-effective, the heavily subsidized ideas actively went against the field research conducted by scientists and explorers like John Wesley Powell. The resultant effects from federal public policy including the destruction of wetlands and the rerouting of rivers and creation of reservoirs, have disrupted migratory bird populations and destroyed much of the country's best farmland in order to irrigate land of a lesser quality elsewhere. This continued throughout the 1960s and 70s, with projects the Garrison and Oahe Reservoir. The American Indians, such as the Mandan, Arikara, and Hidatsa of the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation of North Dakota, too, suffered. The aforementioned tribes were forced to leave their historical homes, good land, around which they had fostered a niche way of life and live instead on lands of poorer quality. In their place "American" societies developed around these large, power-producing dams and the reservoirs that covered Fort Berthold (Reisner

195). Additionally, the United States ran campaigns, like that of General Custer's in *Little Big Man*, to wage war on the American Indians.

As demonstrated in Custer's attack on the Washita River in the film and in real life, the whites actively massacred helpless women and children. On the topic Custer remarks that women, too, are an issue because they breed; other members of the U.S. Cavalry offer to trade some squaws for nearly nothing. How can something like this be permissible? An extremely Christian culture, as depicted by the Reverend and Ms. Pendrake in *Little Big Man*, that condemned American Indian culture and religion as pagan thus justifying their persecution if they fail to convert and assimilate into the coming American society. After all, the saying goes that misery loves company. While suspicious of others and often reason for suspicion, evangelical Americans like the Reverend abstained from many of life's physical pleasures, especially related to sexuality, as indicated by both Ms. Pendrake's chaste manner of dress and the innuendo often riddling her speech. It is encouraged to repress one's passions, unless in the context of speaking in tongues in Church. The arc of Ms. Pendrake's character, Reverend's wife-turned-harlot, reveals a sexuality very much alive albeit repressed, as indicative by the subsequent bathing scene. Though marriage is the recommended route for women in this time, it is a stifling and repressive lifestyle. At one point, for instance, when discussing Jack's life among the Cheyenne, Ms. Pendrake laments his presumed "suffering, deprivation, and hardship among those awful savages"; as we watch her horrible husband demand food and eat in what can ubiquitously described as gluttonously, we cannot help but wonder if she is alluding to her own life — especially when she then insists on bathing Jack and her later descent into a life of prostitution.

In contrast, the Cheyenne women are rather self-sufficient and free. After Shadow's death, Jack finds his daughter giving birth in isolation, making not a sound. Jack marries this girl, named Sunshine, and goes on to fulfill another dream prophecy of Old Lodge Skins' in what can arguably described as a teepee orgy (granted they do not have sex at the same time) with her three widowed sisters while she is giving birth to another son. When Sunshine returns and learns this, she smiles, remarking that she knew he was a good man. Sexuality and women's agency aside, the perceived-as-pagan general lifestyles of the American Indians served, in the eyes of the general American population and the law, as justification for persecution. The Protestant leaders of the early 19th century created

a hierarchy of religions with Protestant Christianity at the top. For them Indian 'religion,' if it merited that designation at all, shared the same 'degraded' qualities condemned in the Bible and shared by other 'pagans' worldwide. True religion cultivated 'civilized' standards of conduct and morality, understood in exclusively Anglo-Protestant terms, and made its adherents fit for American citizenship....Indigenous traditions of any kind could be seen only as an impediment to the civilizing process. (Wenger 19-20)

By promoting a religious culture that restricted people's behavior from occupation to dress to sexuality, the stage is set for an anxious and/or unhappy populace that is naturally going to be more complicit and accepting of acts of violence. In fact, when considering Caroline's trajectory after her bad luck with men, her turning to violence as an act of rebellion or rejecting the ideals of the culture producing characters like Mr. Merriweather makes sense. Unfortunately, outlaws, gunslinging, brothels, and other reactionary institutions only provided more justification for the

federal government to expand its scope and power, which can be seen through the motivations of General George Armstrong Custer.

What was this all for???

A strict religious culture based on allegedly “civilized” behavior not only allowed for American Indians characterized as “pagan” and/or “primitive” to be persecuted in pogroms, but additionally kept white American women totally helpless and men helpless without bought technologies and endlessly in competition with one another rather than the desired communion. As a metaphor for this, during the carriage-chase scene in *Little Big Man*, Olga, Jack, and others are panicking and screaming as the Indians pursue their buggie. A pastor or other religious figure is in the cab, holding a Bible. He yells amid the chaos, “We must be civilized!” (*Little Big Man*). Ironically, in that same moment an arrow shoots and kills him, pinning the Bible to his chest in the process. Religion in that instance seemed to have bred passivity. Though Americans are known — or at least like to be known — as a nation of self-sufficient individualists. The expansion of the American West therefore marked a power and cultural shift that totally annihilated any truth to that myth, beginning with the acquisition of the remaining land on the North American continent.

In *Little Big Man*, General Custer is obsessed with (1) himself, and (2) the U.S. presidency. He constantly laments that his efforts in the Civil War were overlooked and Ulysses Grant selected for the job instead of him. Now, angry, spiteful, and megalomaniac, Custer seeks out glory through battle — and the battles themselves. His divisions in real life had a high casualty rate, and he often put his troops (himself included) in risky situations. All this considered, is it so surprising that Old Lodge Skins and the Northern Cheyenne believed the

White Man thought everything, their people included, to be dead? Throughout the development of the American West, the government considered human lives but pawns or collateral damage in the creation of an empire and the resultant reputations of a few. Like General Custer, many people involved in the expansion and development of the United States on a political level were involved for personal profit and self-interest rather than the well-being, success, or longevity of the new American Western communities, which can be seen in greater detail upon examining the policies surrounding water development in the 20th Century.

What does it mean?

Before the Battle of Little Bighorn begins in *Little Big Man*, Jack, in the muleskinner identity prescribed to him by Custer, remarks to the General,

General, you go down there. There are 1,000s of Indians down there, and when they get done with you, there won't be nothin' left but a greasy spot. This ain't the Washita River, them ain't helpless women and children waitin' for you. They're Cheyenne Brave and Sioux. You go down there if you got the nerve. (*Little Big Man*)

Custer, with Homeric hubris, heeds not this warning and meets his doom, not before further lamenting on his battlefield deathbed that Grant got to be president over him. Despite the victory at Little Bighorn, the physically blind Old Lodge Skins abstains from celebration, hoping instead to die. He tells Little Big Man, his adopted grandson, that there has always been a limited number of human beings and that the White Man appears to be unstoppable. He continues, saying, "A world without human beings has no center to it." In his comical failed-death scene, Old Lodge Skins thanks the creator for his successes and failures, but laments that "[He has] decided that the human beings will soon walk a road that leads nowhere." The Cheyenne chief

would rather die than live in such a world. Though he fails to die and walks away with Little Big Man, joking of women, his message resonates. With the settlement of the American West, a way of life (many ways of life, in fact) came to a tragic end and with it, the world lost a continent's worth of knowledge about and in relation to that landscape. Jack Crabb, once known as Little Big Man, returns to the American citizenry, ending his days in a nursing home — an apt metaphor for the helplessness of the new North American human inhabitants after having never been acquired or really introduced to their landscape. What a fall from the days of Jack's youth "livin' Injun," the freedom he once had. When the film pans out, he sits at a table with his head in his hands, looking disappointed, sad.

As we look back at the white characters of the film's main narrative — distrustful, violent Caroline, Mr. Merriweather being whittled away, a drunken Jack Crabb who "need[s] a drink more'n the breath of life itself," Wild Bill Hickock meeting his untimely demise at the hands of a child who lost his father to the man, power-hungry and self-obsessed General Custer driven to risky acts of violence in the name of personal advancement — no one appears altogether happy. And if we consider Ms. Pendrake, as well, certainly not satisfied. The competitive, dog-eat-dog profiteering of the American West appears in *Little Big Man* a violent, corrupt, unjust, and altogether unsustainable lifestyle that, when applied to politics and policymaking, fit to create a dangerous situation if the wrong policies are implemented — especially if, like General Custer, leaders refuse to admit errors or revoke bad decisions.

With knowledge of the landscape lost, U.S. policymakers were (and arguably still are) largely in the dark (aside from a few explorer-scientists that no one really listened to anyway) about the North American landscape and how developmental decisions would affect the

geography over time. Instead of stewarding small, relatively self-sustaining communities, such as the Mormons in Utah praised by scientist John Wesley Powell, resource-as-commodity and/or profit-based decisions caused many landscape-altering, Anthropocene changes to be wrought quite hastily, harmfully, and often needlessly. These specific policies, players, events, and repercussions can be explained and are illustrated through a juxtaposed analysis of the 1974 Roman Polanski film *Chinatown*.

Doing as Little as Possible:
Bad Government and Bad Citizens in Polanski's *Chinatown*

Indeed, with the settlement and development of the American West, we lost the knowledge pertaining to the continent and then went on to make large, largely-permanent structures that caused irreversible and inconceivable changes — almost all negative — to the landscape. Despite scientists actively advocating for certain strategies pertaining to irrigation and settlement, politicians based their decisions on a desire to create a wealthy empire (Purdy). Government officials of all varieties thus authorized public works projects designed to settle the nation and stimulate its economy throughout the 20th century; these infrastructural decisions and their resultant land and water allocations quickly caused unprecedented environmental disruptions, putting us on the verge of total collapse. The style of decisionmaking characterizing the development of the American West are depicted in the 1974 Roman Polanski neo-noir film *Chinatown*, in which a young Los Angeles is trying to expand as debates in courts and city councils take place in regards to dams and reservoirs. Private eye JJ Gittes soon finds himself involved with the sudden death of Mr. Hollis Mulwray, the chief engineer of L.A. Water and Power (an interesting name to keep in mind moving forward), which leads him deep into the

framework of an unimaginably corrupt city. The events illustrated in *Chinatown* can help us understand the implications of our designs on both ourselves and the planet.

Prior-Appropriation and Misinterpretation

The film begins with a client, one Mrs. Mulwray, approaching our on-the-fringe hero JJ Gittes asking him to look into rumors about her husband having an affair. He proceeds to follow Hollis Mulwray around in order to catch him in the act, which he eventually thinks he does. Before that, however, Gittes gets acquainted with the city's ongoing water debates and Mulwray's investigations related to such. He, for instance, attends a court hearing in relation to the Alto Vallejo Dam/Reservoir. Note a large portrait of FD Roosevelt above the bench. Many farmers crowd the seats as contractors and L.A. Water and Power make their cases. While Jack Nicholson reads the section of the newspaper on horseracing, those in favor of the dam are speaking of its benefits and potential to save Los Angeles from the looming desert. During his proposal, the former mayor of the City argues, "Without water, the dust will rise up and cover us as though we never existed. Now the Alto Vallejo can save us from this, and I respectfully suggest that eight-and-a-half million dollars is a fair price to pay to keep the desert from our streets — and not on top of them" (*Chinatown*). Despite an alleged drought, chief engineer Hollis Mulwray will not authorize the dam, citing the soil composition of the proposed build site making it too dangerous a project. He cites a failed project, the Vanderlit Dam, which represents the Saint Francis Dam Disaster, saying, "I'm not going to make the same mistake twice" (*Chinatown*). The farmers in the courthouse are very upset, one yelling, "You steal water from the Valley, ruin the grazing, starve my livestock; who's paying for any of that, Mr. Mulwray? That's what I wanna know." Looking back over the news of the past five years or so, farmers and

the city of Los Angeles still seem to be at odds with one another. With irrigation and energy being the nation's two largest industries demanding water, the two are competing endlessly for resources in the same desolate geographic space that is the American West.

As evidenced by the "OUR CITY IS DYING OF THIRST" flier on Gittes' car window, the language used by the pro-dam side of the debate, and the newspaper headlines throughout the film, developers are implementing heavy propaganda tactics in order to succeed in their attempts to pass these grandiose projects (Stork). These dams and reservoirs are so large and landscape-altering that once they are built, it is quite difficult to turn back, reminiscent of General Custer's earlier insistence on never changing his mind. Considering the fact that water is one of the few resources in the unwelcoming desert of this country, those wishing to develop an efficient, profitable empire (as we will soon see was the case) needed to solidify ownership somehow. In fact, when we look at the water policy of the American West, from how policymaking decisions are made to why, we see a structure that encourages the cut-throat corrupt behavior revealed later in *Chinatown's* plot.

Scientist and explorer-of-the-West John Wesley Powell advocated for a riparian type of water policy and developmental design. In his *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region*, he cites the Mormon settlers of Utah, whom Marc Reisner also cites as the best irrigators of all time, with a design that:

tapped mountain snowmelt and the streams, lakes and rivers it created with irrigation ditches leading to crops. Powell wanted to organize settlements around water and watersheds, which would force water users to conserve the scarce resource, because overuse or pollution would hurt everyone in the watershed. Powell believed this

arrangement would also make communities better prepared to deal with attempts to usurp their water. (NPR)

Why was he so concerned about failsafes against the usurpation of water? In the Texas Law Review, Frank J. Trelease, a known scholar of water law, writes that the different policies of the Western States of said United States differed between riparian, prior-appropriation, and a combination of the two (Trelease 24). Let us now examine what those two policies entail — because Powell’s vision is not what materialized in the American West.

Looking at the California court case *Irwin vs. Philips* of 1855 once more, we must take a moment to deconstruct the true implications of such a policy. Prior-appropriation defined by Trelease as a utilitarian doctrine (24), it operates on a sort of first-come-first-serve-best-use basis. In the case, appropriators are given permission to draw waters from their “natural beds” because their non-riparian land contained “the most important interests of the mineral region” (*Irwin vs. Philips*). The beneficial use factor therefore trumps any concept of riparianism, a claim the court claims void in light of the government owning the land. The case additionally cites the costly infrastructure necessary to transport all this water — a process that, due to the substance’s weight and subsequent energy requirements, requires the use of even more water, virtually — as justification for beneficial use (a.k.a. profitability). In contrast, riparian law in the East, where water is plentiful and citizens own their land, guarantees landowners rights to the uninterrupted flow of the waterway. This is demonstrated in the ruling of 1881 court case *John Garwood vs. N.Y. Central and Hudson Railroad*, which states, “[plaintiff has the right] to have the water flow as it had therefore been accustomed to flow.” This case ruled that someone’s diversion of the Tonawanda Creek as illegal because it impacted the grinding power and therefore efficacy of a

downstream mill. This emphasis on economics specifically in the West as apparent by this vague and easily manipulatable policy difference has its implications on the resultant market and culture it creates.

Manipulative People, or a Manipulatable Policy?

What's a holy grail if it's empty? When all one has to do to get water, the most prized resource of them all, is have a good reason and a plan and be the first person to set up shop, it seems inevitable that not everybody is going to think things through. The nation's policy on this topic focused on efficiency, managerialism, and power, as were its policymakers, thus easily coming under the influence of people looking to make a profit — and historically, these bad ideas seem to be funded by the government, taxpayers, and additionally contributed quite heavily to the national debt (Reisner throughout). In addition, the size of these proposed feats of engineering could in and of itself cause a politician to approve a detrimental decision because of the notoriety it brought him and the economic boost it brought his state. Thus we return to the film to see the former mayor of Los Angeles advocating for this San Vallejo dam and reservoir, despite the chief engineer's concerns. The plot of corruption that unfolds in *Chinatown* illustrates the problems this type of economically-driven policy can cause — for the environment, individual people, and everything we hold near and dear.

Despite the dangers associated with the San Vallejo project, officials are willing to move forward. Mr. Mulwray, in opposition to this, states that over 500 people died in the previous dam disaster, which should be considered when evaluating whether or not to approve this new project. It is interesting that the alleged Vanderbilt Dam disaster referenced by Mr. Mulwray is based on the history surrounding the Saint Francis Dam. In 1928, William Mulholland, a head of the water

and power facet of the Los Angeles city government, decided to enlarge the size of a dam being built in the San Francisquito Canyon, against his engineers' advice (Reisner 101). Barely making it through half a month, the dam quickly disintegrated into mud and released the pent-up river, once again wild. The flood, with its sweeping, domino-effect, cost hundreds of people their lives (450) and over a thousand their homes. Additionally, the flood waters destroyed eight thousand acres of farmland (Reisner 103). Mulholland's rationale for his decisions, including filling the dam quickly thus causing further stress on the structure, was that "he didn't want Owens River water to go to waste" (Reisner 103). In Polanski's *Chinatown*, Mulwray tells the courtroom, "I'm not going to make the same mistake twice." (CITE) Other people, however, made fiscally powerful by their acquisition and use of land and water rights, see to it that Mulwray cannot stand in their way, highlighting the hostile markets and culture created by prior-appropriation water policy through its potential to be misinterpreted and therefore abused.

The emphasis on wealth and profit in this country is so intense that the entrepreneurial characters in the film murder Mr. Mulwray after he discovers the extent to which they went to attain the water rights to divert rivers towards Los Angeles, continuing its growth and development. By following Mulwray around, Gittes discovers that the city has been dumping water into the ocean during this alleged drought in order to create a demand for water in order to justify taking the water from the Owens Valley. While the city claims to be diverting water to irrigate orange grows in the valley, a process that causes some runoff, Gittes eventually learns from area farmers that the water department and real estate offices have been sending people to blow up their water tanks, and poison their wells, crops, and fields. When considering the prior-appropriation laws of the land, we can begin to understand why. In order to continue

developing, Los Angeles needed to appear as if it truly *needed* that water, that was going to a less profitable cause. While the farmers appeared to be failing at their trade, development would bring tourism to the region, as well as new residents along with the markets created. Returning now to William Mulholland's narrative, we see that another component to the situation came from the idea that Owens Valley, while its irrigation seemed to be failing, could survive if it were to "develop its minerals its mining, its potential for tourism" (Reisner 101). L.A., on the other hand, was apparently so starved for drinking water that it would fail to keep the desert from closing in. Prior-appropriation law encourages cut-throat competition and sprawling, unchecked development because it necessitates that water be put to some use — or else someone else will take it. As the farmers of the Owens Valley in California and in *Chinatown* learned, you snooze, you lose. And from the sidelines of society, Gittes learns a similar lesson.

Sitting Out Means You Can't Participate

The hostile and corrupt environment fostered by prior-appropriation policy, which encourages unchecked and constant growth via its "beneficial use" clause in an environment with limited resources, allowed for the authorization of many bad decisions that shaped the resulting markets of the American West and the cultures they cultivate. When confronted with these issues in Polanski's film, Gittes is powerless to stop these unjust policies; dissatisfied with the values of his society and its "system," he had decided to opt out of the mainstream. Rather than work as a police officer, where he found he rarely effected any change, Gittes owns a private eye practice, looking down upon those who operate within the system. While he claims to make an honest living, the only work we see him do is snoop on people allegedly having affairs.

Despite this, his attitude towards more conventional, socially-acceptable occupations is more than condescending. For example, during a confrontation with a banker at a barbershop, Gittes tells the man, “People only come to me when they’re in a desperate situation; I help ‘em out. I don’t kick families out of their houses like you jerks who work at the bank.” What is distasteful to the banker about Gittes, however, is the fact that he sells to the media people’s dirty laundry. So long as the truth is not aired for the public to see, it may as well not exist. This is the case with the city’s water policy in the film, which makes it easy to misinform Gittes, an outsider, proceeding to use him as a pawn to further advance their gains.

From the very start of the film until the very end, JJ Gittes is used by those in power in order to accomplish their goal: the San Vallejo Dam. Gittes does not have access to all available information about Los Angeles, so he is easily manipulated and used by other people. Sure, he can get into the scene of the crime by stealing a bureaucrat’s business card, but he is unable to truly understand what is going on or even know who is in charge. He physically harms Evelyn for being inconsistent about information regarding Hollis Mulwray’s alleged mistress and who exactly she is, unable to understand the extent of the corruption. Evelyn is not being inconsistent as he repeatedly slaps her across the face — the girl is her sister *and* her daughter. Noah Cross, the wealthy landowner and head of the Albacore Club (reminiscent of the Boone and Crockett Club of which Theodore Roosevelt was a member), who raped and impregnated his own daughter, has a water monopoly on the city, which he uses for his own personal gain, no matter the environmental or social harm it causes. This familial perversion mirrors the perversion of policy in the American West, violating the tenets of human communion and society and our environment.

Havoc Wreaked by the Powers That Be in an Ignorant Mainstream Society

The West was founded on people ditching their homes and going to get rich on some industry. People really were not concerned with community in this post-Civil War time. Like General Custer, many people did not come out on top after the War, and the West was heavily advertised as some sort of second chance. Any sense of community was clearly nonexistent based on the quick destruction and depletion of resources wrought at the hands of early settlers, to the point where Theodore Roosevelt administration (perhaps the first presidency to which this term is applicable) restructured the federal government with a managerialist vision of national efficiency. Compartmentalizing landscapes, policies that fostered industry, might of the nation. Because many of the politicians have some weird masculinity complex as evidenced by their desire to dominate the landscape, mad at the river enacting policies to “tame” and “punish” it, Noah Cross eating the fish with the head on, Floyd Dominy as a force unreckonable, Roosevelt loving government but hating democracy, etc. Considering the title of the film as well as its constant references to China and the Chinese, we are reminded that this society is based on a lot of oppression, disrupting cultures, uprooting people, importing and taking things from others, etc. When thinking about how this all happened, it seems as if the industrial revolution a growing disillusionment with everything in the U.S., media beginning to perpetuate anti-society us-versus-them narratives like the Western or the noir genres which our two films subvert. If people like Gittes were to get involved or had from the beginning been involved, would we be where we are today? Which, might I add, is not a very good place.

What is clear from the tragedy that is *Chinatown* is that we are powerless from outside of society, and what the environmental consequences of our policymaking thus far shows us, there

is no without. Seeing as a seemingly simple maneuver such as trying to live an agrarian lifestyle in the same place for the whole year brought immense changes to the land in early colonial New England (Cronan), it is frightening how minute decisions made by humans can alter a landscape. The water projects allowing the development of the American West caused a near-endless list of environmental problems that reverberated throughout the planet. When looking at what prior-appropriation allowed developers to do, we see great feats of human engineering like the Grand Coulee Dam and the city of Los Angeles; however, the extreme damming and rerouting of rivers that took place in the American West has caused unprecedented and unpredictable environmental consequences that have altered the landscape, prevented the natural world via rivers from completing its natural (and beneficial) systems, and caused many problems we now associate with climate change. The grand failure of prior-appropriation policy in the American West and its even-grander consequences illustrates the need for the U.S. Government on all levels to address water development policy and move towards a new system and style of government that addresses this problem of the Anthropocene—and people in government who will address it.

At the start of prior-appropriation-style decision-making, the United States was relatively young and little was known about the landscape. What was known by American Indians or discovered by scientists like John Wesley Powell and Aldo Leopold warned of the disastrous effects the claiming and rerouting of rivers would have on the environment at-large. While Rocky Mountain geologist Powell did want irrigation similar to that practiced by the Mormons in Utah, he had specific plans that involved conservation and community empowerment. He “wanted to organize settlements around water and watersheds, which would force water users to

conserve the scarce resource, because overuse or pollution would hurt everyone in the watershed. [He] believed this arrangement would also make communities better prepared to deal with attempts to usurp their water.”¹⁰ Politicians, however, had other ideas.

Powell noted that when it came to irrigation, “a few inches of extra rainfall or a couple of thousand feet of elevation difference would mean a project that was worth developing or, on the otherhand, a project that would require heavy subsidization.”¹¹ Despite how much the climate and landscape affected the success of irrigation projects, the precision and care for which Powell and other scientists advocated did not appear in developmental policy. Many politicians, such as J.A. Williamson, Commissioner of the Department of the Interior, General Land Office, did not read the reports published by such scientists¹², while others thought that such conservationist ideas were limiting to economic development and growth, with rationale such as, “There's too much planning in this. There's too much regulation. There's too much community control. This is not the American way.' It would interfere with rapid development. It would interfere with free enterprise.” Upon Powell’s death in 1902, the government began building a series of subsidized dams and canals.¹³ The projects and the water rights behind them were largely determined by the doctrine of prior-appropriation, which rests upon seniority rights, as well as profitability and beneficial use (which usually meant development).

While Powell and others recommended a more riparian, work-where-the-water-is type of system where small communities irrigated the very land they farmed, prior-appropriation,

¹⁰ NPR, “**The Vision of John Wesley Powell:** Explorer Foresaw Water Issues That Would Plague the West,” <http://www.npr.org/programs/atc/features/2003/aug/water/part1.html>

¹¹ Reisner, Marc. *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water*. 137.

¹² Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States with a More Detailed Account of the Lands of Utah, by James Powell, 1879.

¹³ NPR

first-come, first-serve rights enabled people to reroute water to irrigate once barren landscapes and create reservoirs for previously impossible cities like Los Angeles. Through a sort of utilitarian policy forcing people to put their water to good use, prior-appropriation allowed developers to usurp the rights of landowners and farmers who were either not actively using their water supplies not getting low yields on their crops, making them susceptible to being bought out. While this created the great cities of the empire imagined by Theodore Roosevelt and his cohorts in the Boone and Crockett Club, an organization based on masculine ideals and required the killing of big game to enter,¹⁴ it also caused intense disruptions in nature's systems, causing many of the problems we now associate with climate change.

Not only were these dams oftentimes poorly-placed and built, as was the case with the Teton Dam in Wyoming, they also caused unprecedented changes to the surrounding—and faraway—environments. Disrupting routes of fish and cutting off breeding grounds, interrupting floods and thus destroying floodplains and wetlands leading to a disruption in bird migration, eroding of riverbeds so as to make it impossible for fish to breathe and difficult for mollusks, etc., the silting of reservoirs, the erosion of beaches the irrigation of less-than-ideal farmlands thus triggering a pesticide treadmill the runoff of which seeps into waterways, the draining of riverbeds of nutrients, the energy required to transport heavy water to cities in the West, the amount of water ($\frac{1}{3}$ of the Colorado, for instance) lost to evaporation each year¹⁵, these projects have a seemingly endless list of negative effects on the environment. Rivers serve very important functions in creating biodiversity, which dams and canals wholly disrupt.

¹⁴ Purdy, Jedediah. *After Nature; A Politics for the Anthropocene*.

¹⁵ Silenced Rivers: Rivers No More - The Environmental Effects of Dams

This has created a barren landscape out of an already barren landscape. Wildlife is largely nonexistent, and the continent is so fragmented that the idea of surviving “in the wild” has disappeared alongside the biodiversity. This leaves our cities in a precarious situation, completely dependent on not only this complex waterworks infrastructure that reroutes rivers and creates reservoirs for oil, agriculture, drinking water, and energy, but also on other infrastructural systems like roads and powerlines. Fixing this begins by acknowledging what policies are currently wrong and working to change them.

How Will We Ever Fix Such a Mess?

Chinatown depicts the chaos of urban planning in the West and the near-inconceivability of any one person doing anything about it. The characters in the film have a sort of leave-well-enough-alone attitude that implies both a failure in design and a certain sense of futility of situation. After all, Gittes learns the hard way that snooping around may make the situation worse. He, however, operated from a position semi-separate and, at least in his mind, at odds with society at-large and those in charge. While he is able, through the use of other people’s business cards and his connections from when he *did* work for the L.A. police force in Chinatown, to get around some institutional obstacles, Gittes has a comparatively limited volition because he chooses to live “outside the system.” This puts him in an extremely manipulatable position; repeatedly from the start of the film, Gittes is used as a pawn in the greater workings of Los Angeles politics. Looking, too, at Evelyn’s tragic narrative, we see that people, even her father, readily manipulate and use her for their personal gain, which is, in the land of prior-appropriation, the law of the very same.

Despite causing Evelyn to get hurt in the end, Gittes seems to be an objectively good person, especially in comparison to many characters in the film. Alluding throughout to a former incident where he caused someone else he care about to get hurt, Gittes seems to have left the police force because he wanted to avoid bloodying his hands with a corrupt establishment. This is additionally seen in the incidents in which Gittes compares his lifestyle to others, including bankers and police, It seems, however, that his refusal to get involved, his doing as little as possible, became in its own way a form of working for the system through complicity and vulnerability. Considering the environmental scope of the movie thanks to its dealings in water resource management, these themes all too accurately describe the issues within much of the progressive, liberal portion of the American population. Like the macabre incest, murder and violence, and manipulation in *Chinatown*, the U.S. government has acted so abhorrently over the last century that idealistic, good-hearted people turn away from the system in disgust. We see this manifesting itself in movements like Occupy Wall Street and the growing number of by-choice homeless youth, or something like an intentional community, where people live according to their given lifestyle “removed” from the nation.

LIKE CHINATOWN, LOS ANGELES IS A FAKE SOCIETY, OUT-OF-PLACE WITH ITS ENVIRONMENT, IMPORTING SUPPLIES AND LABOR FROM ELSEWHERE.

Thus it is a fallacy to believe we can somehow leave our society, operate outside of it; this is rooted in the idea outlined in Cronan that human civilization is somehow separate from nature, which is but commodifiable and in existence for the purpose of profitable repurposing.

Unfortunately, we must accept that it really is all the same place, and we humans are the driving

effect on the landscape. Therefore, when we idealistic, level-headed people refuse to participate in the politics — or governance, the structuring of our societies and how to peacefully exist together through collaboration and compromise — we are choosing to be nothing but passive, foolishly allowing corrupt, greedy individuals to appropriate our communities and their resources for unsustainable personal gain that will have their effects on the land and the nation for generations to come.

Conclusions about Chinatown

Everything being interconnected, there is no escape. And the mainstream society that has formed because everything has been allowed for so long to go unchecked only increases the urgent need for people to question the current state of things, reject it, and live their lives towards changing the culture through criticism and authenticity. Gittes learns how truly connected everything is, and just how far-reaching into the future these policies are, like the Cross family incest. Evelyn is inevitably sacrificed, and while Gittes blames himself for being played, it seems she was already doomed. Rather than blame himself for the specific incident, he should be blaming himself for allowing things to have gotten this far. To have allowed the world to look like this. To let other people shape his world.

Those of us with good intentions, solid minds, the blessing of a good upbringing, a desire to see a positive future, can no longer hold the position that other people are to blame. Is Gittes being honest when he says he makes an honest living? Perhaps he is honest about his living, but is it any more authentic, meaningful, sincere, as anyone operating within the system, in a mainstream occupation? When looking at the culture developed from our engineering feats and designs, we

find an added duty to get involved with politics and live our lives by example. Waiting around waiting tables waiting for our big break waiting for angels.

Gittes learns that the hard way, for a second time. “Forget it, Jake, it’s Chinatown,” are the closing remarks of the film, meant to imply that the situation is too convoluted to comprehend or involve oneself with. Keep your head down, you don’t know what you’re dealing with. No, we don’t, because we do not have access to all the information, the knowledge, from the outside. We do not have the keys the the castle, but we could.

V. Where Will We Go Now?

Before the Saint Francis Dam collapse, William Mulholland arrived at the site of the dam, inspecting reported leaks. Brown water indicated that the water was “seeping through the canyon walls, softening the mica shale and conglomerate abutment.”¹⁶ The very same night of the inspection, the reservoir tore the dam down, causing the disaster inspiring part of *Chinatown*’s plotline. How could that have happened, if the brown water is allegedly a “telltale sign” of trouble? According to Reisner, “William Mulholland chose, if not exactly to ignore, then to disbelieve. After all, it was *his* dam. Would the greatest engineering department in the entire world build an unsafe dam?”¹⁷ Though bold and innovative, Mulholland was also described as “reckless, arrogant, and inexcusably careless.”¹⁸ Though before Mulholland’s time, this attitude is reminiscent of General Custer, whose character in *Little Big Man* audaciously told Jack Crabb that his life was not worth the reversal of a Custer decision.¹⁹ When considering the American Indians who succumbed to or whose lives were severely changed by both Western

¹⁶ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water*. 101.

¹⁷ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*. 101-102.

¹⁸ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*. 104

¹⁹ *Chinatown*, 1974.

expansion and Western water development in the century after the Civil War, it seems as if the U.S. government has historically held a similar attitude. In the decade leading up to the creation of both *Little Big Man* and *Chinatown*, for instance, with projects like the Garrison and Oahe Reservoirs. Tribes such as the Mandan, Arikara, and Hidatsa of the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation of North Dakota suffered at the hands of these irrigation feats that area farmers who were the supposed beneficiaries did not want.²⁰ The aforementioned tribes were forced to leave their historical homes and instead live elsewhere on lands of poorer quality. In their place “American” societies developed around these large, power-producing dams and the reservoirs that covered Fort Berthold.²¹ As we have seen, these decisions, often approved by Congress without being economically viable or effectively designed, have had detrimental effects on both the environment and the American way of life.

In politics today, we see in debates an emphasis on historical preservation of our Constitution and/or the ideas and feats of our forefathers. Issues surrounding the Second Amendment is what first comes to mind as an example of this tactic in practice. Recall the photo of FDR in the courtroom in *Chinatown*, General Custer’s bitterness about *not* being nominated for President, and Noah Cross’s desire to own the future by developing the Owens Valley. With wealth and power in mind, a managerial government, composed but of people, constructed the United States; our laws, policies, and projects of the past reflect this mentality. Thus, the resultant American culture that came to be reflected accordingly. Considering the environmental effects we have seen worldwide because of U.S. water policy in the West, we may have the wrong mindset.

²⁰ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 342.

²¹ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 195.

In fact, examining the lives and struggles of specific policymakers can illustrate that the overall system is to blame rather than the decisions of individual people. Returning to our friend Floyd Dominy, a womanizer, gambler, and heavy drinker whose dam-building frenzy as commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation caused a plethora of environmental problems, we can see that the decisions of policymakers were often shaped by the flawed system of laws they inherited. At the start of his career, Dominy tenaciously attacked politicians who attempted to get passed bad projects, criticized the miscommunication between policy makers and engineers, and had the economic empowerment of people in mind. He soon learned, however, that there exist many legal roadblocks in the way of “doing the right thing.” When he tried to enforce the Reclamation Act, he learned that laws are so vague and manipulatable that enforcing them is almost comical. In regards to the Columbia Basin case, Dominy tried to enforce laws that would stop speculation, but the fine was only \$850.²² The difficulty with which justice came, alongside the fact that Dominy’s friends were senators and congressmen from the Western states, causes his legacy to be remembered as a somewhat tragic narrative. Reisner writes,

He had begun as a crusader, a person who at least appeared to possess a sense of fairness and justice, a non-engineer whose outlook was basically agrarian. He ended his term as a zealot, blind to injustice, locked into a mad-dog campaign against the environmental movement and the whole country over a pair of Grand Canyon dams.”²³

Rather than deal with the Noah Cross-type landowners such as the Irvine Ranch landholdings, Dominy began ignoring violations of the law, and trying to circumvent it himself in order to build more dams.²⁴ After all, without more dams, he and the rest of the Bureau were out of jobs. Despite being well within the system, despite wanting to effect positive change and help people

²² Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*. 249.

²³ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 249.

²⁴ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 257.

other than himself, this mentality of national efficiency and continuous production limited his action and the amount of changes he could realistically make as well as influenced what exactly he tried to change and do.

President Jimmy Carter, too, found it difficult to make positive changes. Unlike Dominy, whose struggles came from weak or poorly-designed laws, giving up in the face of opposition, Carter failed in his execution, perhaps by being too idealistic. Upon being elected he released a sort of “hit list” related to the water-projects issue. Focusing on conservation and his love of wild rivers, he came off as “plain kooky,” desiring to stop all development.²⁵ Keeping in mind, society’s values, this obviously did not hold water. Carter’s Assistant Interior Secretary Guy Martin remarked,

What Carter *could* have done is pick the three or four worst projects instead of nineteen, or thirty-two—that was another problem, he kept changing the numbers on them—and get rid of them. He could have done it. In war, you don’t take two dozen beachheads on the same day. You can’t, for God’s sake. But he could have won some big ones. Auburn Dam, for instance. If that dam failed, it would be the world peacetime disaster in American history.²⁶

Carter failed to realize that when we are dealing with a government based on the initiative to commodify natural resources and develop the nation at ever-increasing production rates, change cannot happen overnight in a phoenix-like rebirth. Nor can one person effectively bring Promethean change. General Custer, William Mulholland, Floyd Dominy, and even idealistic Jimmy Carter were seemingly too steadfast in their own ideas and the belief that they themselves were bringing success to something once failing. Our friend JJ Gittes had a difficult time standing up to the system from without, and it looks like those making an effort from within are

²⁵ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 341.

²⁶ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 342.

finding it difficult to effect change. Society's inequities, in both wealth and power, are still great despite our democracy.

It is, however essential in this Anthropocene age to create a politics and from those politics a society that takes into account the values of nature in an attempt to incorporate them into everyday life.²⁷ In light of the unhappy Western culture alluded to in both *Little Big Man* and *Chinatown*, Purdy questions the live-and-let-live attitude of our society bent on "boundless economic growth."²⁸ To go against mainstream ideals, especially economically, in the name of a view of nature is difficult but necessary moving forward. He writes, "Withholding judgment, though it may seem egalitarian, ironically simply benefits those whom the present system privileges, because it leaves their privilege undisturbed."²⁹ Later, he writes,

Citizens must understand that, in environmental politics as elsewhere, their government is choosing among values, in the face of disagreement, and that such choice is unavoidable. A democratic people should be able to hope that, over time, it is improving—not just getting richer, but understanding more of how it intends to live and coming closer to that ideal. For this to make sense, its members must be able to step outside the familiar present and call on a better version of the country.³⁰

Though detrimental, the great engineering feats that are the water projects of the American West show the capacity for innovation, creation, and human accomplishment—as do the films we have discussed.

While the Hollywood culture imposed on the landscape of the American West is superficial and vain, encouraging the inauthenticity and detachment from community Purdy discusses in *For Common Things*, subversive films like *Little Big Man* and *Chinatown* are in and of themselves great feats of the human imagination, executed. With their unique plots within

²⁷ Purdy, *After Nature*, 284.

²⁸ Purdy, *After Nature*, 284.

²⁹ Purdy, *After Nature*, 285.

³⁰ Purdy, *After Nature*, 286.

popular genres (the Western and film-noir), the films incorporate the history of the United States to put both ideologies and events under a critical gaze. They criticize both our apolitical production-based fiscal values, daring to imply that we can indeed do better. To quote Romantic poet, printmaker, and critic of mainstream and market-perpetuated art William Blake in his annotations on the lectures of British Royal Academy of Art President Sir Joshua Reynolds, “The Foundation of Empire is Art & Science Remove them or Degrade them & the Empire is No More--Empire follows Art & Not Vice Versa as Englishmen suppose.”³¹ Blake additionally believed that art was the execution of artistic ideas. Thus art, by presenting new perspectives, ideas, and realities, can help us grow as a species. And as the interconnectedness of the natural world through its migrating birds, rivers, aquifers, and landscapes teaches us, the world is constantly in motion, even if humans, the driving force of change, live in stasis. In order to avoid the fates of all desert societies before, we need to be willing to collaborate, listen to one another, and find sustainable solutions and methods of implementation.

Now, with every facet of our infrastructure on the verge of total collapse, we find ourselves at a crossroads. Our nation is fragmented geographically, politically, ideologically, and by other markers of identity. Refusing to believe the truth does not make it disappear, which William Mulholland and others learned the hard way, at the cost of many lives and livelihoods. While we may have inherited this past and its ugly truths, we are no less responsible for the future. We have a duty to ourselves to face the facts and admit that we’ve been wrong.

All this magical technology and innovation and ideas all around us and the fact of these films in and of themselves show the human capacity for innovation. It’s not too late to say sorry,

³¹ Blake, William. *Annotations to Sir Joshua Reynolds’ Discourses*.

despite the fact that General Custer disagrees; we must work together, all nations, all people, prize those with knowledge and ask them to share. This is based on the authenticity of self and society that we lack but, according to Purdy in *For Common Things*, so greatly desire. The only way to achieve this goal is for each of us to foster it ourselves — our individuality is all we have. Like the American Indian tribes who with their different lifestyles once inhabited this continent fully and let us not forget still do, we could, together, create for ourselves unique and meaningful cultures that, employing the many ideas that exist in order to collaboratively pave a better tomorrow. This is based on an authenticity of self that we must foster in the wake of falsehood. All we have to do is try.

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